
THE TROUBLE WITH MAGIC
THE HEXTON CHRONICLES
No one can hide their magic forever...
AMY WILSON
Inside illustrations by Eric Deschamps
nosy crow

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First published in the UK in 2026 by Nosy Crow Ltd
Wheat Wharf, 27a Shad Thames,
London, SE1 2XZ, UK

Nosy Crow Eireann Ltd
c/o Fieldfisher Ireland LLP
45 Mespil Road,
Dublin 4, D04 W2F1, Ireland

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ISBN: 978 1 80513 564 7

A CIP catalogue record for this book will be available from the British Library.

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A. following rigorous ethical sourcing standards.

Typeset by Tiger Media



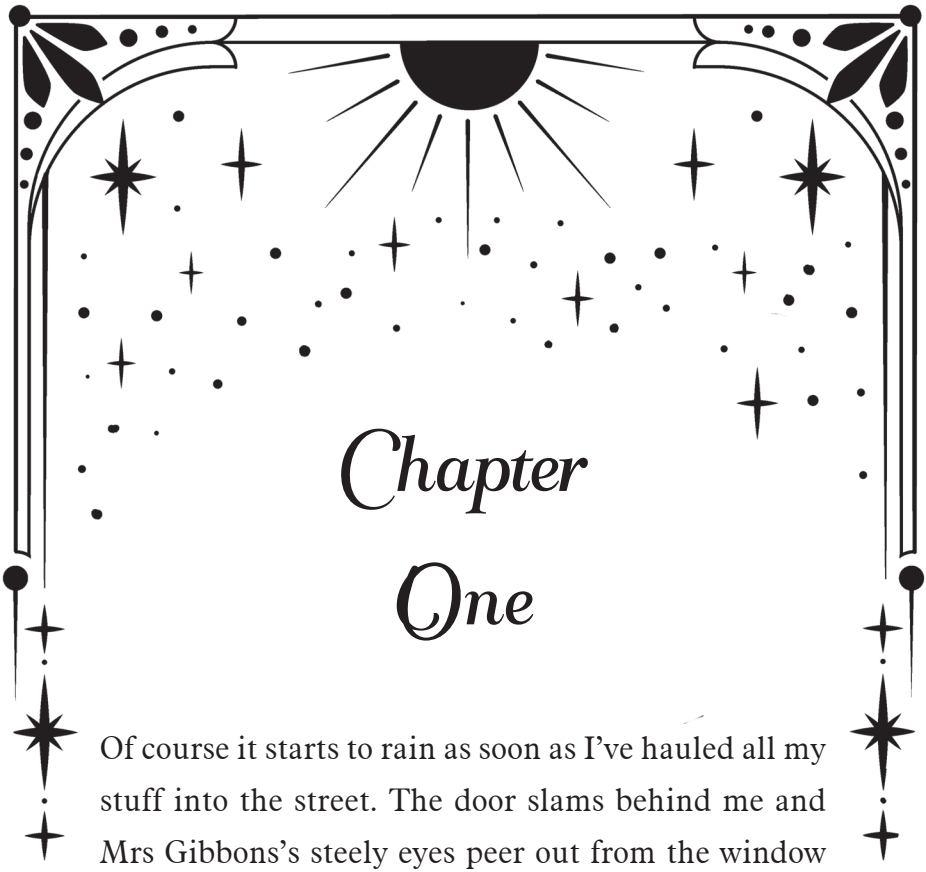
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For ATLAS,
A.W.

When you were very small, my Fray, you used to ask me,
"But what is magic?"
And you'd tangle your fingers in my hair and I'd tell you this…
Magic is the tiny seed deep inside everyone,
That knows us best, that grows – if we nurture it – and makes all things possible.
In Hexton, at least, we know how to nurture it.
With words and actions, a little mischief too,
We grow our magic to great, thundering resonance
And we find its best course –
Through water for some, and in stone for others. Some bend shadows; others grow great forests; others still make golden bees hum like tiny messengers.
If we're truly listening, we'll find our way
And what we can do with magic then is endless, Fray.
But we start small, and we start careful
With that little seed.
And we care for it deeply as we watch it grow,
For it doesn't always grow into something good.





Chapter One

Of course it starts to rain as soon as I've hauled all my stuff into the street. The door slams behind me and Mrs Gibbons's steely eyes peer out from the window while I hoist my bag up on to my shoulder. I glare at her. She flaps a hand, shooing me away, and whisks the horrible purple curtains across the window. And there it is. Out on my own.

The cobbles are slippery underfoot as I head towards the bridge, to the part of the city where nobody dares go – nobody but the Spellers. I've avoided it for years,

let it rest in the corner of my eye like a bad dream lingering, even while it called to me. I couldn't let it draw me in. I've spent years tucked away from magic, only for my grandfather's Croxometer to arrive and send its coppery magic out all over the place, putting Mrs Gibbons into a panic.

"Thanks, Old Skeg," I mutter under my breath, shoving the Croxometer under my shirt. The round, brass instrument arrived last night in brown paper with a careless note about: *the last of dear Old Skeg's worldly possessions, clearly labelled for his beloved grandson Fray*, and after I'd finished scoffing at the words *dear* and *beloved*, neither of which would ever have come out of Old Skeg's mouth, I unwrapped it and instantly forgot where I was because the Croxometer thundered at me, bewitching with its mysterious movements and rhythms.

I'd forgotten, how it did that. Old Skeg had shown it to me just one time, when I was small and we still lived together. He closed the curtains and cupped the Croxometer in his wrinkled hand and at first I had thought it was an old pocket watch, but once he opened the lid it was unmistakeably magical, with whirring dials, golden cogs – and endless sparkling. It was the most magical thing I'd ever seen. He said one day it would be mine.

And then it showed up, without him.

I don't know how long I was staring at the funnel of dark-gold sparks that burst from it like stars before Mrs Gibbons found us and all hell broke loose. She swung in before I could hide it and her mouth fell open, and the whorls of light only bounced harder, showing up all the dust in the poky front room with its squishy velvet furniture. The ceiling was like the night sky in fast motion; the fireplace gushed with phantom flames. I thought it was quite beautiful. Mrs Gibbons did not.

"Out!" she shrilled at me. "I won't get a wink of sleep with that thing in the house... It's the last straw. I warned your grandfather when I took you in that the *moment* there was a hint of magic you'd have to go. Off with you, get over that bridge

before you bring trouble!"

"I already bring trouble," I'd yelped, moving out of her way and clattering up the stairs away from her.

"Human trouble!" she called out after me as I banged into my room. "Late-for-school trouble, forgot-your-homework trouble – that's one thing. This is Speller trouble; it's *dangerous*!"

Her voice reverberated as I gathered up my meagre possessions with a lump in my throat. A purse of my father's, filled with strange hexagonal bronze coins, my mother's much-crumpled note about magic being a seed, and a snow globe with a looming old house in it which I wrapped in a scarf Old Skeg left behind last time he visited. I packed it all in my school rucksack, bundled in my underwear and grabbed the battered Mantel cloak from the hook on the back of the door.

I turned and looked around the room one last time. Small, and damp in winter, it had been home for a long time. I always knew there was magic in me, I always wanted to get away, to Hexton, where true magic lives – I was *waiting* for him to come and whisk me away.

He never did.

The Croxometer thrills against my skin now and something begins to twist, deep in my belly. So I run, until the magical town of Hexton begins to emerge from the shadows ahead of me. Forbidden Hexton – my birthplace, the home that never was.

The bridge that separates Brigstone from Hexton rears up ahead of me, metal struts heading for the moon. On the Hexton side the houses are older and smaller, the streets are narrower and the street lights are oil-powered things that gloom in a yellow sort of way, making darkness crawl up the stone walls.

I came once with Old Skeg, years ago. He strode through the shadows in this very same tattered cloak I'm wearing now, which still smells of him, and everybody shot out of our way. At the time, I thought they were afraid of him, like I was sometimes, because he was bristly and quick-tongued. I only learned later that it was much more complicated than that. We Mantels were not

welcome in Hexton – we were only barely tolerated anywhere else. I still don't understand why.

But he did say Hexton was our real home. And since I have nowhere else to go, and my whole body is vibrating with the force of the Croxometer, it seems the natural choice.

The bridge shudders as I get to the middle. A black car veers towards me, as if to mow me down, and I scramble to the side, clinging to the railings. The cold surge of the river tilts towards me as the whole thing sways, but it's an illusion, set by Spellers to entertain tourists or put them off entirely. It's going to be hard to trust anything from this point onward. Shadows writhe like living things around me and I will myself to keep calm.

"Keep your wits about you," Old Skeg had growled that day, years ago.

He told me to remember it well, because I'd be back one day, when I was older. For now, he said, I had to stay out of sight in my nice safe life in Brigstone – something about dust settling. So I did.

I waited, because I *knew* this day would come. I had known it every day I'd eaten soggy cornflakes while Mrs Gibbons pressed thin bread into margarine sandwiches. Every day as I went to school, carving a space around me with every step. They'd all known too – the kids and the teachers. They had known the magic blood would get me one day – I just hadn't thought it would happen like this.

Somewhere in the back of my brain is the knowledge that Old Skeg probably hadn't meant for it to go this way, that he'd hidden me here with Mrs Gibbons for good reason, protecting me the best way he could, until it was time to go back. Someone must have rifled through his things after he died and found the Croxometer with my name engraved on it. Sent it packed up like a bomb to dismantle my life.

Bang bang, here I am.

Not how Old Skeg meant it, at all.

But it helps a bit to be angry with him. Packs my muscles with spark, gets the fire going in my chest. I'm going to need it. I hold my breath and count to

five, watching the illusion of the black car disappear into the gloom, reminding myself that the bridge has been here for hundreds of years and will *probably* survive my crossing.

Whether *I* will survive is more the problem right now.

I've made it to the Hexton side of the bridge, and my boots have crossed over an invisible line into another world, where the Croxometer sings like a bird, as if to confirm that nothing will be the same. Behind me, the city lights of Brigstone are steady, the silhouettes of skyscrapers cutting through the stars. It looks safe, and organised. Shiny. But ahead of me, and beneath me, and all around me, the magic of Hexton has fallen like a deep fog, and every corner is obscured – it's like walking into a painting done in fuzzy lines and blurred shapes. Nothing is certain here.

The Croxometer is thrilling at me, pulsating with every step I take, sending static prickles through my skin. I lift it out from under my shirt and open it, just an inch. It's heavy on its tarnished silver chain, its brass cover ornately carved in a pattern of stars and sun and moon. The motions are whizzing far more over here than when I first unwrapped it, sending even brighter spangles into the Hexton mist. It looks a bit like a compass, with a main dial that's constantly moving, but there are six other dials, each of them with a sapphire at the centre, surrounded by numbers and characters I've never seen before.

"Stop it," I whisper. The pitch drops to a low hum, a ticking that matches the beat of my heart. Shadows flit before my vision. I shiver as I take another look behind me, as my feet slip on sodden, ancient wood.

I could just turn back.

I imagine Mrs Gibbons's terraced house, sitting neat. My room, everything tidy on the little desk and the shelves on the wall. Then I see her face, the look of horror directed at me, and I face forward. If I belong anywhere, it should be here.

This was what I wanted, deep down, only I never had the courage to do it before. Old Skeg said I should never come alone, that I should wait for him, and I

was a good boy. I stayed hidden, I kept Hexton in the corner of my eye and waited. But now he's not coming, and nobody else is either. I don't even have proper images in my mind for my parents, they've been gone so long. They're as strange and unknown as this mist.

But I do have this Hexton-made cloak. This pull, deep in my belly. This Croxometer that pulses, warm in my palm, like a living thing. And *perhaps* that curling feeling in my stomach is the seed of magic, finally coming to life as my mother always said it would. Shadows twist around me – I have always had a way with them – and I step into the fog, pulling my cloak around me.

Onward, *Fray.*

I tuck myself into the dark of an ironworker's shop doorway and pull my cloak tight around me, hoping for just a moment of shelter while I try to work out which way I should be heading. Rain gurgles in the gutters, and the gargoyles across the street are vomiting into narrow channels cut into the cobbles. My shoulders

ache and my feet are cold and damp in my old worn-down boots. The street lamps bubble and hiss, letting off a fug of black smoke, and even though I can see open shops, nobody's going into them.

I do have a plan. There was a letter with the Croxometer, tucked deep inside the workings, all yellow and stiff, as though it had been there for years.

Fray,
I've a feeling this will be heading your way, one day. When you get it, and if there's trouble, head to Hexton. You come from great magical ancestry - you'll find your place there; your very own brand of magic. Watcher Ingles owes me a favour. You might need to remind him. Be proud to be a Mantel, complicated as that may be. There is work to do, Fray, and Hexton has been waiting a long time. Be careful, be guarded, and look after the Croxometer as if your life depended upon it.
Power on,
Skeg

So it was plain enough, and again I'm doing exactly what he said. Or trying to. There isn't really any other choice.

The Croxometer pulls at my neck, its steady tick flaring. I move further into the doorway and take it out of my shirt. It falls open, a burst of coppery dust blowing up into the darkness. I wince, hushing at it. I've no idea if it really is sentient, but there's something there. Something that cuts through all my shadows, thrilling at me, urging me to embrace the magic that was always forbidden; that I've spent years trying to hide.

I wonder what kind of reception I'm going to get from Hexton. From Watcher Ingles. What will he think of me turning up on his door, alone and unannounced? I lean my head back against the smoked-glass door of the ironworks shop, just as it's yanked open.

Slender vice-like hands grab my shoulders and drag me backwards into the shop and an evil-looking face peers over me, amber eyes glowing like hot coals. I pull myself away – my shadows scattering like scraps of darkness – scrambling up and swinging my overfilled rucksack by one strap, crashing it into the shoulder of the wiry little man. He howls and puts a hand out to stop another onslaught. The Croxometer turns icy cold against my skin and something rushes through me – magic, rumbling and sparkling, making bright white lines crackle between us. We are jolted away from each other, him into a wooden counter, me skidding back on to the floor. My heart thumps as my head cracks against the door frame but I haul myself straight up, ready for more.

The man stares at me from the counter, skinny arms folded. He has iron-grey hair that drags to his shoulders, and when he smiles his canines glitter, too long and far too sharp for human teeth.

"Mantel," he says in a dusty voice. "In the very flesh."